

**THE
ALEXANDER
THOMSON
SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER**

Issue N° 39 August 2009



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We now have a new name for the project in the former Caledonia Road Church. This emerged as part of the project development and design, and is appropriate for the proposed uses for the entire building, providing a clear reference to Thomson, and creating a public place named after the architect. Thank you for the suggestions for names that were sent to the Society.

The project has considerably advanced since the last update and following grant funding of £200,000 from Glasgow City Council Development and Regeneration Services being confirmed in October 2008, the design team developed the project to the stage of full Planning Application and Listed Building Consent, which was submitted to the Council in late March 2009.



The entrance to 1 Alexander Thomson Place is through the rebuilt Thomson doorway, leading into the gallery from the courtyard.

There has been a small amount of publicity generated by the application and the project was mentioned in the Herald, the Daily Record, the Sunday Times and two BBC Radio interviews. It also formed part of a 3-way Thomson feature in Prospect magazine. Further publicity will take place if and when the Planning Application is approved, which we hope will be in late summer.

The breakdown of funding received to date comprises £210,000 from GCC Development and Regeneration Services, £15,000 from the local GCC Area Committee, and £2,000 from the Alexander Thomson Society.

As part of the planning process, the project was presented to both the Glasgow Urban Design Panel and Architecture + Design Scotland in June 2009. Reports from each of these organisations will be sent to the



Planning Officer. To date we have been sent a copy of the report from Architecture + Design Scotland, which was highly supportive of the proposal. Their report will be available on the A+DS website in the near future. A Conservation Plan for the historical remains was also prepared as a requirement for Historic Scotland. A full building, stone condition and photographic survey also formed part of the documentation. A stonework strategy has been prepared for discussion with Historic Scotland. We await the outcome of the applications.

The next stage of the project will be to secure funding to advance the design to the preparation of the Building Warrant submission for the entire proposal. The Society has applied to Glasgow City Council for £300,000 and is awaiting a decision. There are many other organisations seeking funding for their projects causing considerable pressure on the already diminished GCC budgets.

A Public Funding Appeal will be launched by the Society later this year with assistance from Glasgow City Council, subject to Planning Approval being granted.

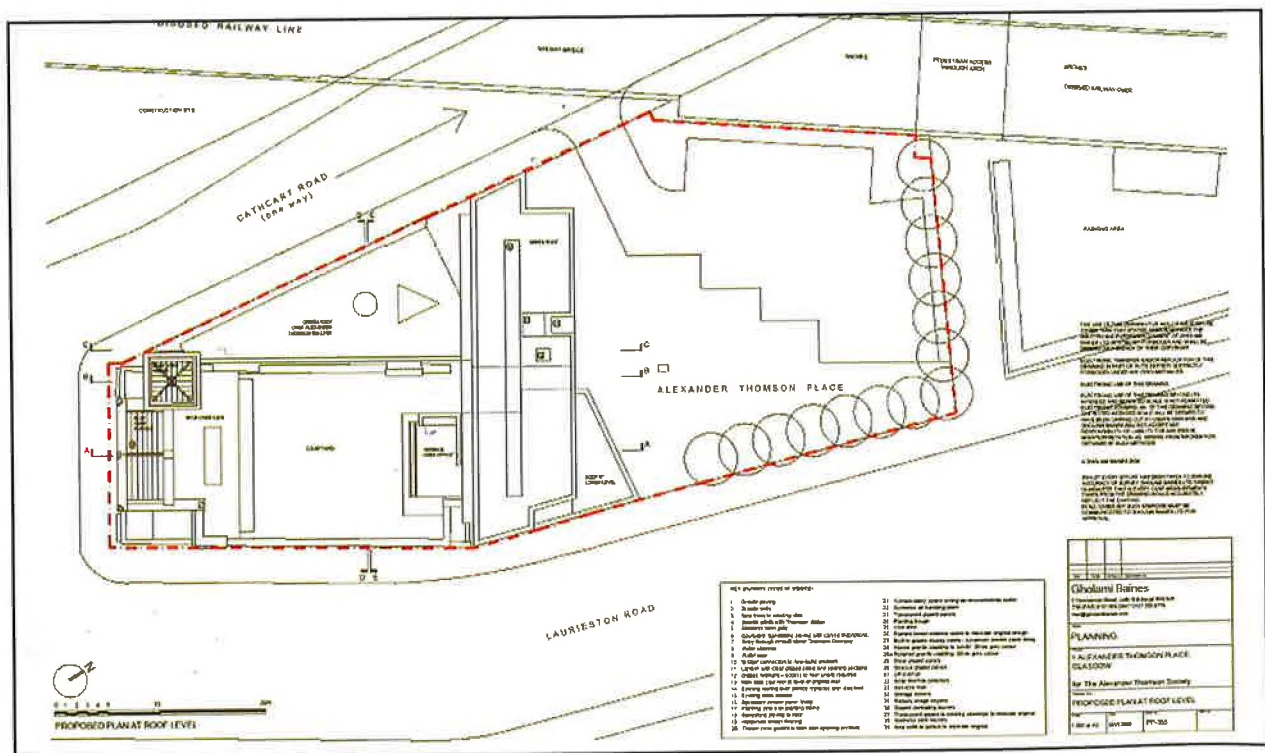
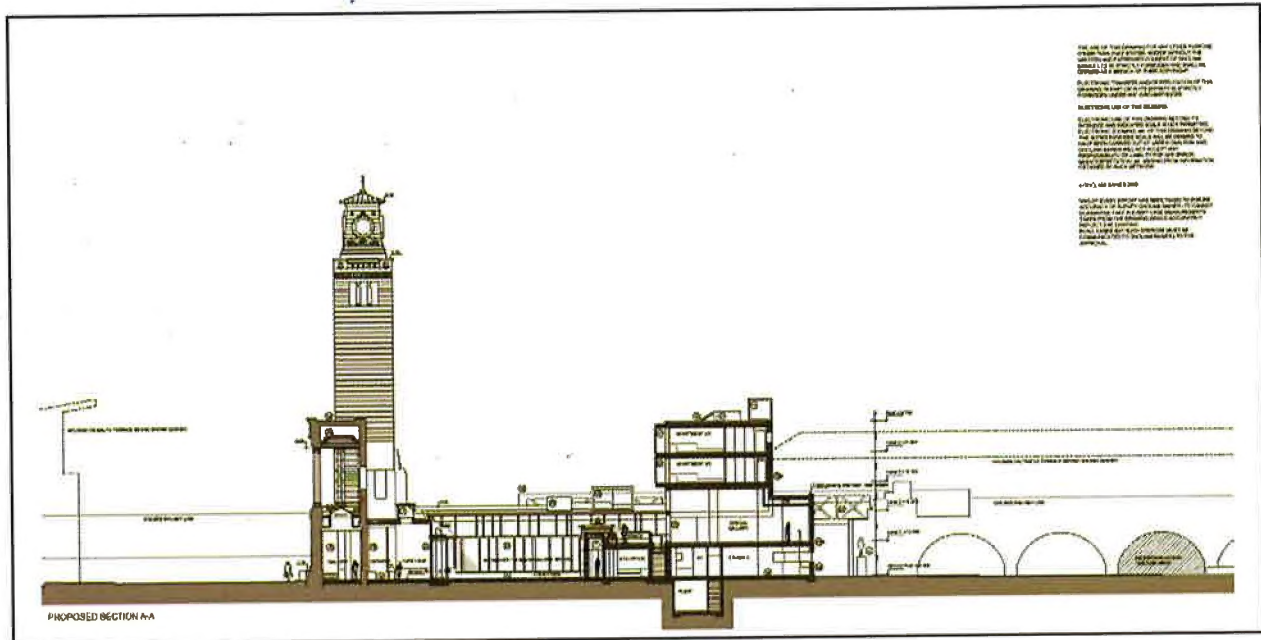
We have also been offered the remains of one demolished stone doorway and a small section of cast iron railing from Thomson's office building that stood at the corner of West Regent Street and Wellington Street in the city centre. The site now has a recently completed new commercial building and it was not possible to incorporate the items into the design.

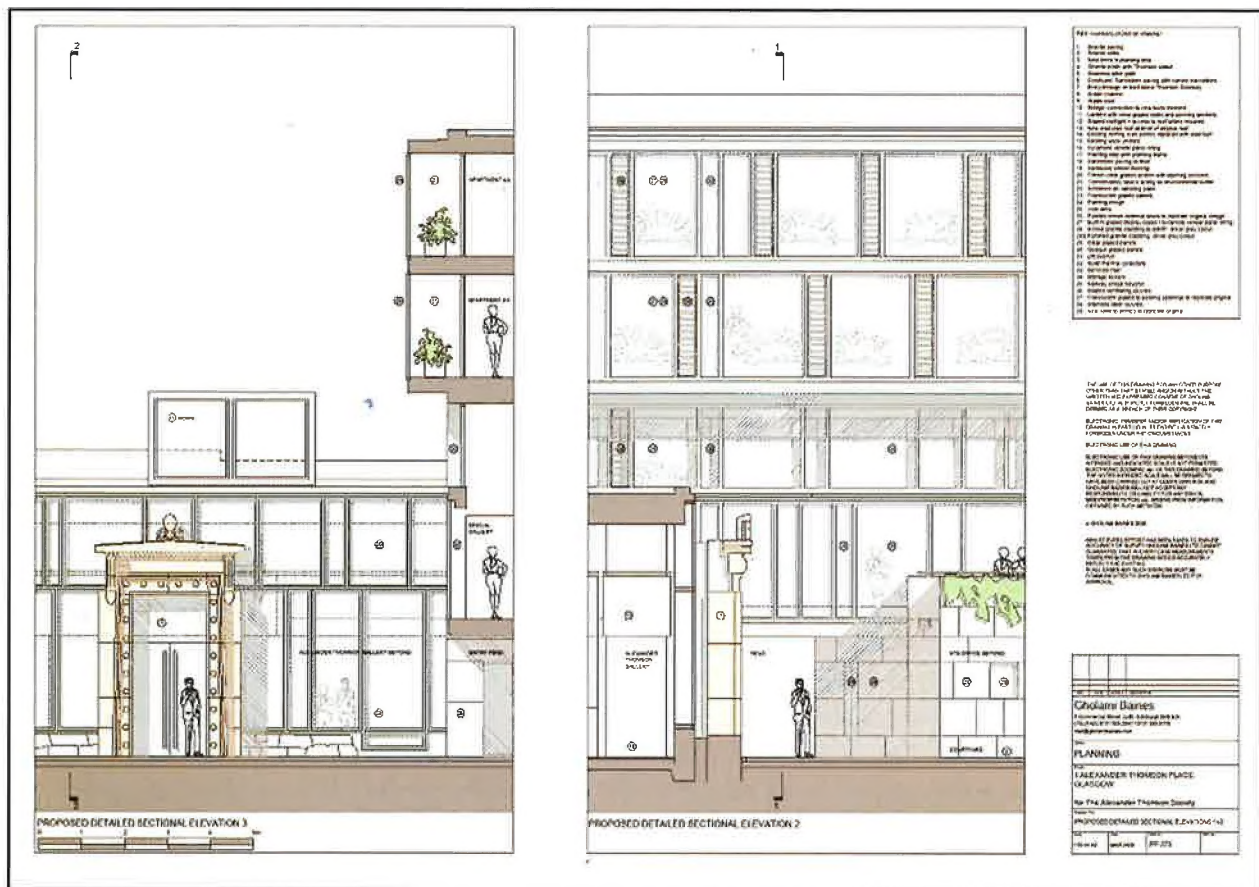
These pieces will form part of the Alexander Thomson exhibition planned for 1 Alexander Thomson Place due to their historic relevance.



It is intended to display a selection of the project documentation and drawings at the ATS 2009 Annual General meeting.

Project Consultants : Gholami Baines Limited; Ross & Morton; David Narro Associates; Buro Happold; Heath Architects; Dr. Dorothy Bell; WHITE design.





This year's quartet comprised three talks and a film night and was, as in previous years, held in the Mackintosh Lecture Theatre at the Glasgow School of Art each Wednesday evening between the 18th March and the 8th April. As has been usual in the past couple of years each event was preceded by refreshments and a chance for conversation between members and guests.

Each event sheds light on different aspects of Thomson's buildings and career.

LECTURE 1 Brian Park of the architectural practice of Page and Park talked about the latest phase of preservation work and repairs then being carried out on St Vincent Street Church. This involved replacing the original slate roof with a lead covering as well as reinforcing the timber beams within. Not surprisingly Brian was at great pains to point out the difficult conservation issues involved.

LECTURE 2 The following week saw the screening of two black and white films courtesy of Scottish Screen archive within the National Library of Scotland. The first, straightforwardly called 'Alexander Thomson' (1967), featured footage of his architecture with an excellent and perceptive commentary by the late Fred Selby. It was able to show many of the buildings in their near original context as well as showing buildings which are unfortunately no longer standing. The second and shorter film simply called 'Film of Glasgow' (1932) was made by an amateur film maker and showed the nature of pre war life against the architectural and urban background within the city of Glasgow in many different lights prior to the substantial destruction of the 1960s onwards.

LECTURE 3 Next up, Sally White (ATS Secretary) and Mark Baines (ATS Vice Chair) presented the Society's proposals for 1 Alexander Thomson Place formerly Thomson's Caledonia Road Church in Hutchesontown, Gorbals. They charted the often and ultimately disastrous history of this landmark building and the efforts of the Society, with substantial support from Glasgow City Council, which allowed the design development of the project to enable it to be submitted for Planning Permission at the end of March. Sally White's more detailed update elsewhere in the Newsletter carries further information on the project's subsequent progress.

LECTURE 4 Finally Gary Nisbet, Sculpture Historian, gave a talk entitled 'John Mossman – the Father of Glasgow Sculpture'. This was a fascinating and beautifully illustrated survey of his studio's work which adorns many Glasgow buildings and memorials in the Necropolis. We are hoping that Gary will contribute an article to the next Newsletter. This formed a fitting end to the series, occurring as it did on the eve of Thomson's birthday.

The attendance was high and the Society would like to thank the speakers who made these evenings such an enjoyable experience for all and thank every one who came and contributed questions. As usual we invite any suggestions for speakers and subjects in which the members would be interested.

Mark Baines

We hope to be able to announce next year's series at the Doors Open Day in September 2009.

Cases Update - The update on Egyptian Halls and St. Vincent Street Church has been summarised from an article in Prospect 135, the most recent quarterly publication from Architecture Scotland.

EGYPTIAN HALLS

Proposals for Egyptian Halls by architects, The Morrison Partnership, on behalf of developer Union Street Properties have been developed over the last eleven years, partially delayed due to the complex procedure of securing ownership of the entire building.

The current condition of the building fabric continues to deteriorate, notably the collapse of one of the main cupolas and the loss of much of the internal plasterwork on the upper floors due to water ingress, which has also badly rotted the timber floors.

"The intention is to reinstate internally those features where it is appropriate and practical in the context of the proposals, as well as financially viable bearing in mind the need for Planning and Listed Building Consents. Externally we will be endeavouring to retain principal features such as the front elevation and where detail has been overlaid with more recent finishes we will endeavour to reverse that work. Elsewhere inside the building we may discover other features hidden by more recent works. These will be recorded and where possible and practical we will endeavour to retain them in some form."

George Morrisson, The Morrison Partnership.

Discussions about the proposals, which include a contemporary roofscape intervention, are ongoing with the relevant Authorities.

ST VINCENT STREET CHURCH

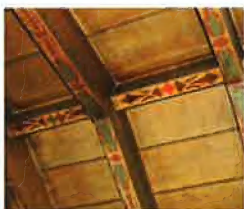
Architects Page and Park on behalf of building owners Glasgow City Council have now completed a second phase of restorative works to the roofs of the building. In order to resolve a long history of water ingress, which continued after a reslating of the side aisle roofs in the early 1990s with wrongly sized slates, the decision was taken by Page and Park, in conjunction with Historic Scotland and Glasgow City Council Planning Department, to specify lead finished roofs.

Another major issue to resolve was concern about the slender timber structure of the sanctuary roof having adequate inherent strength and lateral restraint even before the additional load of the new lead work. An interesting solution of discreetly fixing thin steel plates which span the full length and tie the truss beams into the wallheads at either end was adopted.

"Was it really right to leave the structure in that condition if there is an opportunity to consolidate with minimum intervention? The Sanctuary space had to be preserved at all costs and in themselves these interventions – the new lead roof finish and the structural strengthening have gone a substantial way towards securing the building's future."

Ian Hamilton, Page and Park.

The photographs included here were taken by Natasha Marshall and show some of the decoration at roof level.



THOMSON AND THE GLASGOW UNITARIAN CHURCH : A FORGOTTEN COMPETITION

In 1853 Alexander Thomson was a partner in the firm Baird and Thomson (1849-1856) located at 132 Hope Street, at this time their second address which they occupied from 1853-54. Thomson had just finished work on the Howard Street warehouse and his early villas including The Knowe.

In 1852 it was decided by the Glasgow Unitarian Church congregation, whose minister was the youthful and able Rev Henry Crosskey, that their existing church building in Union Street was too small and they should sell it to raise money to build a larger church just outside the city centre to the west.

The building that was eventually erected at the western corner of St Vincent Street and Pitt Street was by Thomas Rothead but it is not generally known that Thomson also submitted a design which was ultimately rejected under controversial circumstances.

The church designed by Rothead, which stood from 1856 until its demolition in 1982, was a small building in Grecian Revival style. To hold 600 people, it had a hexastyle ionic portico with a central doorway on St Vincent Street which was approached from a few steps on the left and right. The pillars were unfluted and the pediment plain. The west side of the building remained unfinished as it was intended that an attached tenement be built here but this seems never to have happened. The east side had blank masonry windows as decoration as well as pilasters. The south side was similar to the east but a section of three panels framed by pilasters protruded in relation to a single panel on each side.



Natural light entered the worship area through glass slabs in the centre of the roof. The interior was very distinctive with 14 ancient Greek female statues – like the caryatids of the Erechtheion on the Acropolis in Athens – above head level around the walls which carried the gas lighting. The figures were sculpted in the workshop of J & G Mossman who were the most sought after sculptors in Glasgow at this period. Two of these figures can be seen at present in the foyer of the Abbey building in St Vincent Street. The 1747 Snetzler organ (later expanded) with a case by Rothead in the form of a Greek temple is now in the Concert Hall of Glasgow University.

Unitarians had established a society in Glasgow in 1810 and shortly afterwards acquired a building for their meetings in Union Street. They were regarded by many as Christian heretics as they did not believe in the divinity of Christ. However this did not seem to deter architects from submitting plans for their planned building in St Vincent Street. In July 1853 the Unitarians sold the Union Street chapel for £5,300 and the site in St Vincent Street/Pitt Street was bought for £2,350 from Lord Blythswood.

The Church Committee of Management decided in 1853 to opt for a competition for their new church and the architects who submitted were Thomas Rothead, J. Burnet, Gildard and Mcfarlane, and Baird and Thomson.

At first the design of Alexander Thomson was favoured but it was expensive at £5,792 and he was asked to modify it "with a view to its cheapening and improvement". However Rothead complained that his plans had not been given justice. The Trustees and Committee now re-examined the plans and decided that Thomson's plan had been "prematurely recommended" and Rothead's was now chosen as his was not as expensive as at first thought. Rothead's plans were now described as "in every respect

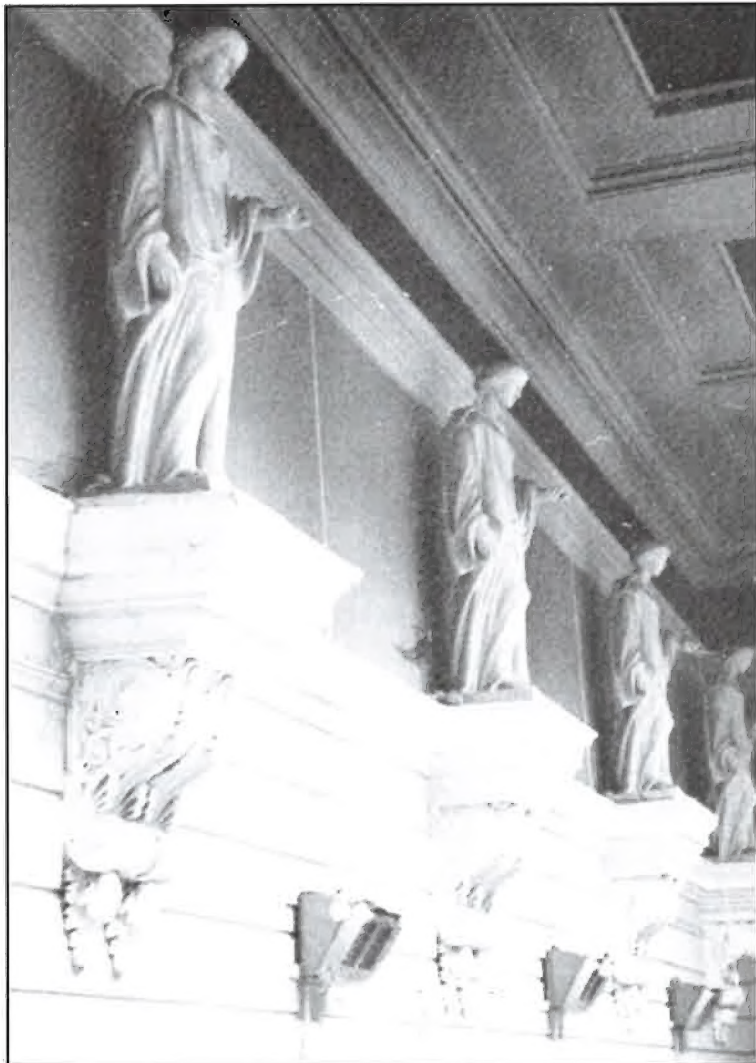
superior and better adapted to the requirements of the congregation”.

However Thomson did not take this change of mind as the last word and he protested and suggested that a panel of Church representatives along with architects who had not entered the competition be set up to decide on the matter. (see letter, p10 - The original letter of 22 February 1854 is in the Church Minute Book of 1854 held in the Glasgow City Archives.) The Unitarian Trustees firmly rejected the idea saying that they had the right to decide on their own affairs.

Rochead's original design, which was Gothic, was estimated in August 1854 at not less than £4000 which was considered to be too high. He was asked to modify his design so that it would not exceed £3000. He said he could not modify it without spoiling the proportions and he put forward, in January 1855, two new designs, a Gothic and a Greek design, with the latter eventually being chosen by a majority of the congregation.

A tight financial situation was a factor influencing the design chosen. This was exacerbated by a difference in theology within the Unitarian denomination for the Glasgow Church, with Crosskey as minister representing the new Unitarian theology of emphasis on personal judgement rather than the Bible as the source of authority. The problem was that the man who had been the first Unitarian minister in Glasgow, James Yates, was by this stage an important figure in English Unitarianism and he was a traditionalist. Thus he refused to help raise funds for the radical Glasgow congregation and so they received little funding from other Unitarian congregations.

It seems likely therefore that had there been sufficient funds the congregation would have chosen Thomson's design which would, like Rochead's, have been Greek in inspiration. Alas, Thomson's design seems to have been lost. However, Thomson was soon to get a bigger opportunity to display his genius when his own United Presbyterian congregation decided to build in St Vincent Street just yards from the Unitarian Church and which opened three years later in 1859.



The above is drawn from an Open University MA dissertation "Three Contrasting Victorian Churches", 2007. (They are Thomson's St Vincent Street United Presbyterian Church, Honeyman's Lansdowne UP, Rochead's Unitarian.) A bound edition of the full dissertation has been donated to the Archives of the Society by Ruth Wright.

Transcription of Letter from Baird & Thomson to the Trustees of Glasgow Unitarian Church 22 February 1854

Gentlemen,

From the complexion matters have assumed in connexion with the Competition for the new Chapel proposed to be erected by your body, and the calumnies with which we have been unjustly assailed in having both acts and motives imputed to us of which we are guiltless.

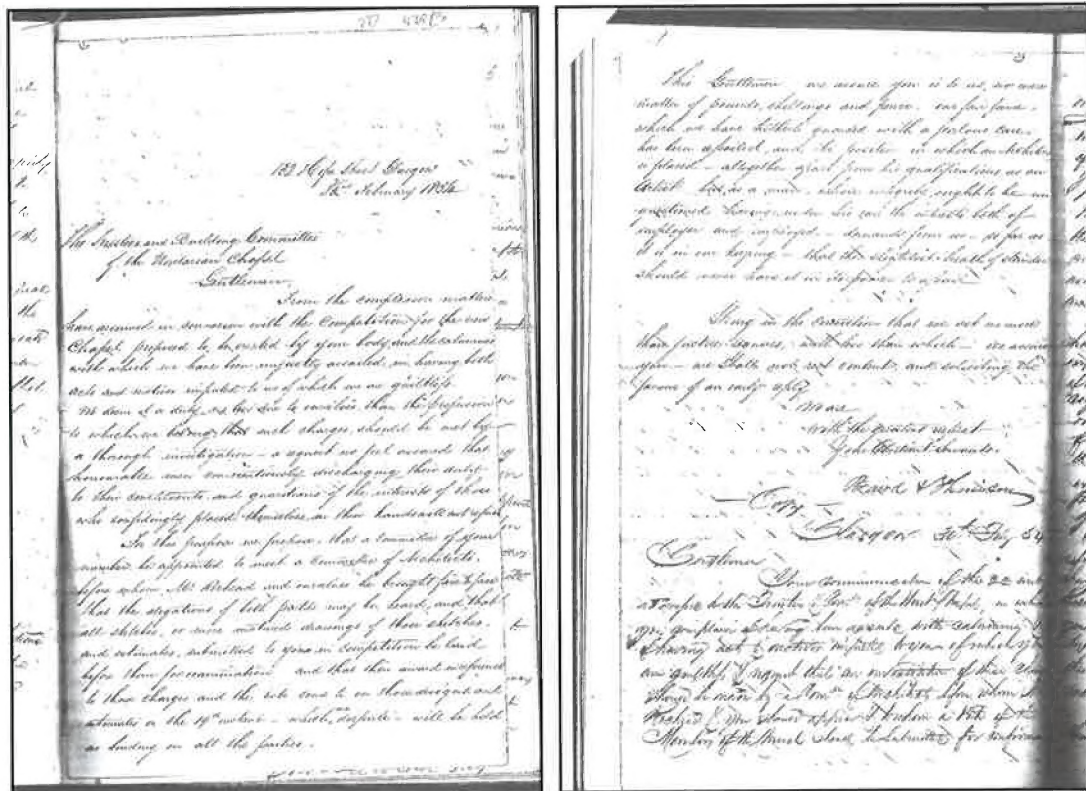
We deem it a duty, no less due to ourselves than the profession to which we belong that such charges should be met by a thorough investigation – a request we feel assured that honourable men conscientiously discharging their duty to their constituents and guardians of the interest of those who confidingly placed themselves in their hands will not refuse.

For this purpose we propose, that a Committee of your number be appointed to meet a Committee of Architects, before whom Mr Rochhead and ourselves be brought face to face that the allegations of both parties may be heard and that all sketches, or more material drawings of these sketches, and estimates, submitted to you in Competition be laid before them for examination and that their award in reference to these charges and the vote come to on those designs and estimates on the 19th instant – which we dispute – will be held as binding on all the parties.

This, Gentlemen, we assure you is to us, no mere matter of pounds, shillings and pence; our fair fame, which we have hitherto guarded with a jealous care, has been assailed, and the position in which an architect is placed – altogether apart from his qualifications as an Artist, but as a man, where integrity ought to be unquestioned having under his care the interests both of employer and employed – demands from us – so far as it is in our keeping – that the slightest breath of slander should never have it in its power to assail.

Strong in the conviction that we ask no more than justice requires, with less than which – we assure you – we shall not rest content, and soliciting the favour of an early reply.

We are
With the greatest respect
Your Obedient Servants,
Baird & Thomson



Roger has arranged his usual range of walks through different areas of Glasgow and the remaining tours from this year's programme are listed on the right. He hopes to keep this range of walks going next year. Look out for next year's list of dates and times of walks on the website in due course.

The West End Festival walks were, as always, well attended and Doors Open Day walks in Dennistoun Conservation Area, The Glasgow Necropolis and Crosshill Conservation Area look at buildings, materials, architects and detailing.

Doors Open Day Glasgow Necropolis Tour - Booking essential on the website - www.glasgownecropolis.org - The DoD buffet after the Glasgow Necropolis Tour is £12.00 - payable in advance.

The Cove and Kilcreggan Walk this year is on 26th September Please book in advance - £5 per person.

GUIDED WALKS 2009

ALEXANDER THOMSON - CITY CENTRE

Friday 7th August

ALEXANDER THOMSON - SOUTH SIDE

Friday 24th July

GLASGOW NECROPOLIS

Wednesday 29th July

CATHCART CEMETERY

Wednesday 5th August

All above walks start at 18.30 and finish 20.30
(no booking required)

COVE AND KILCREGGAN - BOOK IN ADVANCE

Saturday 26th September -

send a cheque to The Alexander Thomson Society
7 Walmer Crescent Glasgow G51 1AT

EACH WALK £5.00

OBITUARIES

ELIZABETH COOK (nee Wilson) Great Granddaughter of Alexander Thomson died suddenly in Arran Memorial Hospital, Lamlash, Isle of Arran on 6 February 2009. Elizabeth did not often leave Arran, but several years ago Elizabeth and her daughter May came as invited, special guests to the unveiling of the Alexander Thomson Memorial headstone in the Southern Necropolis in the Gorbals, Glasgow. She was very pleased that this important memorial had finally been erected and that such a memorable day had been organised by Glasgow City Council and others to mark the occasion.

ANDOR (Austin Harvey) GOMME, English scholar and architectural historian: born London 7 May 1930; Lecturer in English Literature, Keele University 1963-74, Reader 1974-84, Professor of English Literature and Architectural History 1984-95 (Emeritus); Chair, Society of Architectural Historians 1988-91; married 1960 Susan Koechlin (one son, three daughters); died Church Lawton, Cheshire 19 September 2008. He was also a patron of the Alexander Thomson Society.

'On Friday afternoon, my father-in-law, Andor Gomme, died at home. This isn't the place for proper reminiscences, but I wanted to post a brief note on one tiny part of what we have lost. Amongst all the other things that he was, you see, he was a quite remarkable academic, and he taught me more about what it means to be one than, I think, anyone else. I can't imagine, though, that anyone will ever say of me what must certainly be said of him: No-one who met him could ever think the word 'academic' a synonym for 'narrow' again. With seriousness, with delight, with a vast store of carefully culled detail, and with spacious clarity, he wrote on Dickens, on D.H. Lawrence, on Jane Austen, on Shakespeare, and on literary criticism in general; he edited several Jacobean tragedies; he taught his way through the works of Doris Lessing and Paul Scott; he wrote standard works on the architecture of Glasgow and of Bristol, a masterwork on the architect Francis Smith, and (most recently) on the development of the English country house; he produced an edition of Bach's St Mark passion - the list goes on and on. I'm not sure universities make people like him any more'.

THE AGM AND NEW BOARD MEMBERS

The AGM will take place on Saturday 12th September in the St Francis Centre, Gorbals, and the members will receive the formal notice. The Directors (committee members, as they used to be known) would like to extend the range of experience and skills represented on the Board; if you're interested in finding out more write to ATS, 7 Walmer Crescent, Glasgow G51 1AT. We hope to see as many members as possible at the AGM. Refreshments provided.

**THE
ALEXANDER THOMSON
SOCIETY**

**Founded In 1991 to promote the life and
works of Alexander 'Greek' Thomson
(1817-1875)**

Patrons of the Society:

**The Earl of Glasgow
and**

Professor Andrew McMillan

Chairman: Kenneth Burns

Vice Chairman: Mark Baines

Hon Secretary: Sally White

Hon Treasurer: Joanne Smith

Membership Secretary: Brenda Lillcrap

OTHER BOARD MEMBERS:

Roger Guthrie, Ruth Johnston,

Colin McCluskey and

Professor Robin Webster

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**Back Issues of the Newsletter except Number
One (photocopy only)
can be obtained from the
Alexander Thomson Society.**

WEBSITE

www.greekthomson.org.uk

**Information about 1 ATP
is posted on the website.**

ADDRESS

**The Alexander Thomson Society,
7 Walmer Crescent Glasgow G51 1AT
to whom all enquiries and
correspondence should be addressed.**

M E M B E R S O F F E R S

VIDEO

Murray Grigor's video 'NINEVEH ON THE CLYDE, THE ARCHITECTURE OF ALEXANDER 'GREEK' THOMSON' The 55 minute video includes additional footage not seen in its original television showing. The video is available in VHS (also NTSC format for US viewers). The Video is available to Society members at a special price of £12.00, incl P&P.

BOOKS

In 'THE LIGHT OF TRUTH AND BEAUTY', Alexander Thomson's public lectures are brought together in a single volume. They reveal him as a powerful and eloquent speaker, and confirm that not only was he one of the most original architects of his time, but also that his was one of the greatest minds in Scottish architecture.

Published at £9.95 paperback and £16.95 hardback, as a member of The Alexander Thomson Society you can save almost 50% on the retail cost of the book.

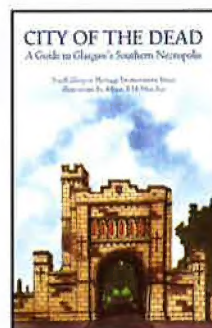
Paperback: £6.00 (inclusive of P&P)

Hardback: £11.00 (inclusive of P&P)



GLASGOW NECROPOLIS AFTERLIVES Tales of Interments

In 'AFTERLIVES' by Ruth Johnston she tells some of the inspiring and sad stories which relate to the monuments and has photographed over 150 stones erected to the memory of major players in the formation of Glasgow during its time as the 'Second City of the Empire.' She has included the architects and sculptors who were inspired to create some of the beautiful monuments in this garden cemetery: Alexander 'Greek' Thomson, J T Rhead, David Hamilton, John Bryce, Charles Wilson and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Full colour throughout Paperback 160pp 105 x 297
£8.00 P&P(UK) £1.00
To order Tel 0141 554 7207
ruth.johnstondesign@virgin.net



**CITY OF THE DEAD - A
GUIDE TO THE SOUTHERN NECROPOLIS**

This newly published book by the South Glasgow Heritage Environment Trust (SGHET) is now available to order. Please write to The Secretary, ATS 7 Walmer Crescent Glasgow or email sallywhite10@hotmail.com and your order will be forwarded to SGHET. £5.99 P&P £1.50